



**White Homogeneity. A decolonial reading of *Debating Diversity* (1998).**  
**Panel: *Why (Not) Race? Expanding the Conversation about Language, Race and Power***

*“It is only a footnote [...] pregnant with developments that are announced and held back, necessary but deferred.” (Derrida 1982: 35)*

Jan Blommaert’s and Jef Verschueren’s *Debating Diversity: Analysing the discourse of tolerance* (1998) was a controversial book at the time of its publishing and has since then been an influential book in Belgian and European sociolinguistics. It demonstrates how liberal discourses on migration in Belgium, discourses that self-identify as open to a multi-cultural society, rely on the same logics of Western superiority as far-right racist discourses.

Today, I want to elaborate on a footnote in which Jan Blommaert and Jef Verschueren claim that “there is a clear continuity between the migrant debate and colonial rhetoric” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 196). In that same footnote they refer to the two racist ideological schemas Etienne Balibar (1991:12) identifies: “the colonial schema, and the schema of anti-Semitism” in which the “imagery of racial superiority and imagery of cultural and religious rivalry reinforce each other” (Balibar 1991: 12 in Blommaert and Verschueren). I believe this

footnote entails the promise of a perspective on racism that is not central to *Debating Diversity*'s thesis nor to many of European sociolinguistic analyses of the last two decades, but that is crucial in order to speak truth to power. Indeed, while the analysis of discourse found in *Debating Diversity* is important and influential, it is not typically portrayed as a book about 'race'. However, in 2020 while re-reading *Debating Diversity* I want to argue that it actually is a book about race, and I think we can take stock of this work to address how race, whiteness and coloniality are discursively reproduced in Europe, even if that wasn't necessarily the authors' intention.

Belgium, or Flanders, the political entity that Jan Blommaert, Jef Verschueren and myself call home, "stands as a microcosm of Europe's past, present, and potential futures." (Blainey 2016: 478). Indeed, Belgium, and thus also Flanders, occupies a particular position in relation to the emergence of capitalism. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), Cedric Robinson points out that "Flanders—geographically situated to service the commerce of the northern seas, and economically critical because of the Flemish cloth industry—was the first of the major European merchant centers." (Robinson 1983: 15). As a result, what we call Belgium today is one of the key places where European trade transformed into an urban industry in which capitalistic principles such as wage labor developed (Robinson 1983). Moreover, in the early centuries of colonialism, this territory was part of the Spanish realm (1556 to 1714) and played a crucial role in the processing of Spain's colonial wealth and the distribution of sugar imports to the rest of Europe (Tellier 2009). Finally, due to its strategic position, the territory was for centuries the place where major battles took place between European powers (Pathak and Singh 2010). Thus, Belgium is at the center of the political economy of early colonial capitalism (Braudel 1985; Tellier 2009). Furthermore, today, its capital is the administrative center of international organizations such as the EU and

NATO, has the second highest rate of foreign born citizens in the world (IOM 2015), and three quarters of its population has a foreign background (Gutiérrez 2013; Hertogen 2013; Statbel 2021). Therefore, I believe that an endnote that aptly but parenthetically points at the continuity between colonial discourse and contemporary migrant debates in Belgium is worth expanding.

*Debating Diversity* shows how problematic it is to present “the issue of migrants [...] as a feature of the *hic et nunc*, as a new and unique problem” and they therefore choose to adopt a historical perspective that allows “to detect ‘deep’ relations” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 28). In 2020, after a decade of calls to decolonize institutions, one might expect their argument to refer to issues of colonialism and whiteness, but in 1998, ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano 2000) was not yet coined and whiteness was still perceived to be an essentially American matter, or one connected to Europe’s settler colonies. In Europe, then and now, people rarely self-identify as ‘white’ but may use ethno-linguistic and national markers that index whiteness implicitly.

In order “to detect ‘deep’ relations” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 28), the historical sources Blommaert and Verschueren connect to racism and discourses about migrants, are nationalism, cultural anthropology, the Christian labor movement, the Flemish far right, and the influence of Europe as a political construction (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). Yet, in line with trace the roots of the Holocaust, the sources Blommaert and Verschueren discern are imbricated with colonialism (Arendt 1951; Césaire 1950), and thus also whiteness and race, the very concepts Belgian sociolinguists have not addressed yet when exploring structural ethnic inequality.

However, to conclude from the above that Blommaert and Verschueren did not perceive issues related to whiteness would be inaccurate, I think. They did define a related construct, but labeled it homogeneity. The concept of homogeneity seems to be universally applicable to describe social processes of racial discrimination, whether in China, India, Europe or the Americas. Of course, Blommaert and Verschueren address local specificities such as the Flemish right wing and the EU in understanding discourses about migrants in Belgium, but at first glance they do not really seem to address other specificities that still mark Belgium's social order, such as whiteness and the "coloniality of power" that is involved in the perpetuation of racialized social inequality (Mignolo 2001; Quijano 2000). Still, I would like to suggest a reexamination of *Debating Diversity* because Blommaert and Verschueren actually made an observation that suggests that they were aware of coloniality and whiteness, as they were juxtaposing different discourses about migrants from Poland and migrants from Congo:

"It is striking that vague notions of cultural history, like the supposed familiarity between Poles and Flemings, are used as an argument not so much in favour of the Poles but against other groups of migrants. It is assumed that 'our people' have had more contacts historically with 'related' groups such as the Poles, and much less or none at all with other foreigners. However, at the level of historical fact, these views can easily be undermined by, for instance, making a comparison between Poles and Congolese (formerly Zaireans). In the course of the twentieth century, Belgians have had more intense contact with Congolese than with Poles. While the interaction with Poles was fairly limited, large groups of Belgians had extensive and long-standing, inter-ethnic contacts with the colonized Congolese. [slide] So, adopting the above line of reasoning, Belgians should have a better 'knowledge' of and more 'affinity' with

the Congolese. After all, one of their official languages is French, and an important portion of their population has been converted to Christianity. Are these two features not generally accepted as central to Belgian ‘culture’? The fact that Polish workers have contributed to the prosperity of Belgian industry by working in the coalmines and steel mills does not distinguish them from the black workers in the copper mines of Shaba, the agro-industrial companies and in the Congolese ports. What then does this affection for Polish culture or the observable aversion to Central African culture stem from? How can it be that, despite three-quarters of a century of intense, deep contacts of which the impact is still visible, Belgians still approach Congolese culture with the greatest exoticism, while unconditionally accepting our ties with groups that, certainly since World War Two, have lived in a literally separate world?” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 94-95)

The answer to their question is found in the next chapter and relies on the concept of homogeneity. However, I would suggest there is a specific kind of homogeneity at work here: white homogeneity or whiteness. Whiteness makes it indeed possible to disregard the linguistic, cultural and historical commonalities that Congolese and white Belgians share and to believe in a closer relationship with white Poles with whom white Belgians barely share a recent history. However, Blommaert and Verschueren also show that “*Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations*” (Mills 1997: 127, italics in original), because in this case whiteness doesn’t necessarily serve better relations between ‘white’ Belgians and ‘white’ Poles. What it does is primarily legitimizing the oppression and exclusion of Belgians of Congolese descent. So, similarly to ‘The West’, which is a historical more than a geographical construct (Hall 1992), whiteness is barely biological, as the limits of whiteness fluctuate through history (Maghbouleh 2017). The same can be said for Europe as

"Europeans have long been unsure about where Europe 'ends' in the east. In the west and to the south [however], the sea provides a splendid marker" (Roberts 1985: 149 cited in Hall 1992: 57).

The example of Congolese and Poles in Belgium casts another light on the analogy between the imagined geography of Europe and the imagined biology of whiteness. Indeed, people constructed as 'black' somehow function in relation to whiteness like what John Morris Roberts (1985) calls the sea in the south of Europe, they are the 'splendid marker', they are the obvious frontier of whiteness. While phenotype, language, culture, and/or religion inform in complex ways the limits of whiteness/Europe in the east, blackness seems to define precisely where the whiteness begins and where it ends, just like the sea defines where Europe begins and ends.

Also, Paul Gilroy frames the sea and the ocean as a metaphor for blackness, but not as the phenotypically detectable contours of whiteness, but rather blackness as the rhizomorphic (cf. Ibrahim 2014), fluid, historically contingent form of identity (Gilroy 1993: 4) in contrast to "the continuing lure of ethnic absolutisms" (Gilroy 1993: 3) that is inherent to whiteness. Indeed, Afrodescendants are a tremendously varied population, "'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature. What this brings into play is the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects." (Hall 1988: 444).

Yet, in Belgium, as Blommaert and Verschueren noted, black people often have close linguistic, religious, historical ties, and I would add intimate family ties, with white Belgians.

Because of these ties, the hard southern border between ‘white’ Europe and ‘black’ Africa becomes more frayed and untenable. They therefore remind Belgium of its own exclusive self-image of whiteness. Black Congolese make whiteness unescapable in the social process of racism Blommaert and Verschueren discern. So, I contend that even if *Debating Diversity* may not mention racialization and whiteness explicitly, and even if coloniality wasn’t even coined at the time it was written, the book still entails moments that hint at an analysis of racism that implies whiteness, racialization and coloniality and leads me to interpret homogeneity as a trope for whiteness.

In Belgium since about 2008 black anti-racist activism has explicitly connected anti-racism to decolonization (Njall Soiresse 2017). The connections with colonialism seems pretty easy to demonstrate when faced with anti-black racism. But let’s not just focus on these socially constructed clear-cut black contours of whiteness as these are only part of the truth. They may help to create clarity, but there is also some important complex racialized border work deployed on the geographic and metaphorical eastern edges of whiteness/Europe, with murderous effect. This is an expression of *necropolitics*, as Achille Mbembe develops in relation to Michel Foucault’s *biopower* (Mbembe 2003; 2019). Because as Foucault made clear, “If the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist. [...] I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.” (Foucault et al. 2003: 256).

I argued that the European form of normalization and homogeneity, is whiteness. Also I argued that Blommaert and Verschueren showed us decades ago how normalization and

homogeneity intersect with colonialism, although they did not elaborate on this idea and only mentioned it in a footnote. Still, a close reading of *Debating Diversity* actually demonstrates that they caught whiteness in its invisibility, even if only briefly. In a way I want to continue investigating how discourse reproduces an ideology of Western superiority, that is robustly signified by whiteness. Because as Jan Blommaert wrote in Dutch on his blog in 2015: “racism hasn’t been for the last two decennia a “taboo”, the opposite is true – the real taboo in the debate about migrants concerns the role and the share of the autochthonous majority and its institutions, regarding racism and discrimination” (Blommaert 2015, my translation). I would add that the real taboo in that taboo is that “the autochthonous majority and its institutions” is epistemologically and ideologically contingent with whiteness, a specific kind of racism imbricated with ideas of culture and class. So, I contend that whiteness has strong explanatory value in understanding a kind of racism that is prevalent in states that self-identify as Western, such as Belgium.

As I said in the beginning, I felt triggered by a footnote in *Debating Diversity*, and that may be just an essential part of what academic work is, noticing how “a footnote [...] [is] pregnant with developments that are announced and held back, necessary but deferred.” (Derrida 1982: 35) and I try to play my part and continue the work Blommaert and Verschueren have started. Indeed, because, if the roots of white homogeneity are to be found in colonialism, as suggested by their footnote, and is thus reflected in contemporary coloniality, undoing it means to decolonize and “whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” (Fanon 1961: 35), not just for those racialized as non-white, but for everyone. I interpret this violence essentially as the confrontation of uncontested ideological frameworks; confrontation with the taboo in the taboo. Addressing the whiteness of Europe may be one of these necessary confrontations.



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